

BRANCUSI

Sublimation of Form



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edited by Doina Lemny

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Brancusi and the Avant-Garde

A Reciprocal Relationship?

Cristian-Robert Velescu



Fig. 1
Constantin Brancusi
Duchamp, Brancusi, Tzara and Man Ray in the studio, 1921
Gelatin-silver negative, 12 x 17.8 cm
Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Paris

¹ See Pontus Hultén, Natalia Dumitresco, Alexander Istrati, *Brancusi*, Paris, Flammarion, 1995, p. 92.

² Benjamin Fondane, *Brancusi*, Saint-Clément-de-Rivière, Éditions Fata Morgana, 2007, p. 40. This text was first published in *Cahiers de l'Etoile*, Paris, II, no. 11, Sept. – Oct. 1929, pp. 708–725.

³ P. Hultén, N. Dumitresco, A. Istrati, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 132–133.

In a photo taken in his studio in the early 1920s, Constantin Brancusi poses next to Marcel Duchamp, Tristan Tzara and Man Ray, three of his guests who all participated in one way or another in the phenomenon of the historical avant-garde. While Tzara, leaning in towards Brancusi, seems to have inserted himself into the frame in a somewhat ostentatious manner, the place of honour – to the right of the host – is occupied by Duchamp, who had known the sculptor since 1912. Together with Fernand Léger, they had visited the Salon de la Locomotion Aérienne at the Grand Palais in October.¹ Man Ray is the last to arrive and with only half his face visible, he occupies a more modest place in the frame (fig. 1).

Despite the presence of his avant-garde friends in this photo, we know that Brancusi was not one to sign up to be the member of any kind of brigade. He rejected creative collectivism as strongly as anti-traditionalism or iconoclasm, 'parameters' that were similarly intended to indicate an action or activity of an avant-garde nature. But some of his works bearing titles such as *Sleeping Muse*, *Danaïde*, *Plato*, *Socrates* and *Leda* prove that, far from professing anti-traditionalism, he nourished his art with the 'sediments' of classical literature. This did not go unnoticed, as is clear from this eloquent testimony from Benjamin Fondane, a personal friend of Brancusi's from the avant-garde sphere: 'How tempting to think that Brancusi's art is of the highest classicism – and to know that, next to him, the classics are just frantic Romantics'.²

To the extent that Brancusi, far from rejecting tradition, was more interested in exploring it, we can say that, alongside the fauvists and the cubists, he played the role of a 'well-tempered' modernist on the Parisian art scene of the time, ready to put his art up against the most markedly iconoclastic tendencies. Looking carefully at the photo taken at the studios located at numbers 8 to 11 of the Impasse Ronsin, we note – not without surprise – that modernity and avant-garde could coexist without any controversy. The sense of amenity that seems to reign between these artists and friends forces the exegete to consider the possibility of a singular symbiosis between modernity and avant-garde, with Brancusi the best placed to take advantage, and the studios in the Impasse Ronsin the best location. Witness the incident of 28 January 1920 at the Salon des Indépendants – a Salon held for the first time at the Grand Palais, with Paul Signac as president. When Brancusi presents his bronze sculpture entitled *Princess X*, Matisse (or was it Picasso?) passed in front of Brancusi's work and exclaimed: '*Voilà le phallus!*' Though we do not know if it was ever sent, the draft of a letter that Brancusi wrote to the President of the Salon confirms the incident: 'While I was positioning my sculptures at the 1st Exhibition des Indépendants at the Grand Palais, you personally warned me that I would have to deal with the police commissioner about the work I am exhibiting: *Princess X*. You told me that, in any case, I could never prove to the Committee that this work does not represent a phallus. And a few hours later, you were shouting in front of Picabia (whom I cite as a witness) that you cannot 'have the minister parading past a pair of balls', and here I am quoting your own words'.³

While Brancusi maintained that his work was just a simple portrait of a woman, it is interesting to note that in a protest in support of the sculptor that was published in *Le Journal du peuple* of 25 February, the signatories, unaware of Brancusi's argument, themselves referred to the phallic form of the work.⁴ Featured among the many signatories are the names of future dadaists such as Picabia and Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes. On the other hand, knowing that turbulence and scandal were true 'dadaist ferments' likely to confer resonance, relief and vigour to the movement that had just appeared on the Parisian scene, the absence of the name of Tzara may come as a surprise, all the more so given that the scandal around *Princess X* might have served as an excellent prologue to the Dada events that were

to follow. It is all the more inexplicable given that Tzara was staying with Picabia, who had witnessed Signac's cursing during his visit to the Salon. In such circumstances, Picabia would surely have told the whole story to his friend 'arrived from Zurich'.⁵ This is why the dadaists, taking advantage of this incident at the Salon des Indépendants on 28 January 1920, probably chose to adopt it for themselves, since it seems, though it cannot be proven, that it served as the inspiration for a special sketch in the programme for one of the dadaist events.

A press release, sandwich men and posters announced with great fanfare the 'Festival Dada', which was to be held at Salle Gaveau on Wednesday 26 May 1920. Even the choice of this hall in Faubourg Saint-Honoré, which was usually dedicated to classical music, could be interpreted as an anti-traditionalist and iconoclastic act on the part of the committed organisers of the show and one intended to flout the consecrated traditions of *la grande musique* in its own home.

'All the Dadas will be having their hair cut on the stage', the poster promised, before detailing the nineteen sketches of the programme in which it was planned for each of the dada authors to interpret their own iconoclastic productions. Lacking a distinct message, these were nevertheless not especially conducive to thrilling an audience that was already prepared to react in an insolent, if not violent way.⁶ On the day of the performance, a large number of figures from Parisian artistic life mingled with the crowd, including André Gide, Jules Romains, Georges Duhamel, Paul Valéry, Jacques Rivière, Jacques Copeau, Roger Allard, Marguerite Eymery (aka Rachilde), Henri Martin Barzun, Roland Dorgelès, Paul Reboux, Albert Gleizes, Fernand Léger, Jean Cocteau, Marthe Chenal, Aurélien-Marie Lugné-Poe, and Constantin Brancusi.⁷

Perhaps themselves aware that their programme was a little dull, the dadas decided to expand the first skit, *Le Sexe de Dada*, throughout the whole of the event: 'The packed house, thanks in part to the invitations and the 'taxes' generously provided by Picabia, had begun to scream as soon as the 'Sexe de Dada' appeared, a huge, phallic cylinder of white-paper resting on two balloons, which constituted the first sketch in the programme. And held on to the 'vaseline' finale. Knowing very well the nature of the entertainment that awaited them, the complicit spectators had stuffed their pockets with various forms of ammunition, just like stocking up on peanuts for a visit to the zoo. Throughout the performance, carrots, turnips, cabbages, rotten tomatoes and oranges, and eggs, along with big paper pennies and the more classic paper darts, described gracious arcs through the air, amidst the animal cries and witty quips that spontaneously erupted among the popular congregations.'⁸

We should remember that Brancusi was present among the spectators. Surrounded by some of those who had signed the protest published in the *Journal du peuple* in February, he may have seen, in 'the phallic cylinder of white-paper resting on two balloons', the rather popular, not to say 'democratic' reflection of his own work that had been excluded from the Salon des Indépendants. He may have interpreted the roar around him – the 'screaming', the 'animal cries', the 'witty quips that spontaneously erupted in the popular congregations' – as a veritable tribute in his honour, or even as a unanimous and lavish extension of the protest published in the pages of the *Journal du peuple* in February, when Parisian intellectuals and artists had come to his aid. This time, it was the whole of Parisian society symbolically gathered at Salle Gaveau that seemed to greet him with enthusiasm, and not only the intellectuals comfortably seated in the orchestra seats. Such an interpretation does not seem entirely groundless, since in his notes about Dada,⁹ Brancusi does make reference to 'dada sculpture'. Witnessing *Le Sexe de Dada* on stage, with the whole room unanimously paying homage, Brancusi might easily have seen his *Princess X* – given its iconoclastic status – as nothing more and nothing less than a 'dada sculpture'. For

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In an earlier work, as part of an attempt to interpret Brancusi's work in the perspective of the religion of the ancient Greeks, especially the Mysteries of Eleusis, I evoked the 'phallic' form as an object of worship. The person who may have served as an intermediary between the artist and the ancient religions was the Hellenist Mario Meunier, the secretary to Auguste Rodin and a frequent guest at Brancusi's studio. See Cristian-Robert Velescu, *Brâncuși Inițiatul*, Bucharest, Editis, 1993, pp. 90–91.

William B. Nelson, 'Aesthetic Hysteria', *The International Studio*, June 1917, CCXXI–CCXXV; cited in William A. Camfield, 'La Fontaine de Marcel Duchamp: objet esthétique, icône ou anti-art?', *Brancusi & Duchamp (Les Carnets de l'atelier Brancusi, regards historiques)*, Paris, Éditions du Centre Pompidou, 2000, p. 85.

12

Ibid., p. 86.

13

M. Sanouillet, *Duchamp du signe*, Paris, Flammarion, Paris, p. 37.

14

Robert Lebel, *Sur Marcel Duchamp*, Paris, Éditions Trianon, 1959.

the duration of the show, *Le Sexe du Dada* had become, 'the double' of Brancusi's mysteriously titled statuary work *Princess X*, a piece imbued with a keen sense of classicism,¹⁰ but nonetheless retaining an indisputable iconoclastic component. With the favourable reaction of the room, it seems that 'the shackles' that continued to prevent it from being appreciated at the Salon des Indépendants were finally being removed at the Salle Gaveau.

By inviting Brancusi as a spectator, the dadaists not only alleviated the sense of their own plagiarism, but offered the sculptor the opportunity, denied at the Salon des Indépendants, for his work to be appreciated, as much in a purely conceptual as a dadaist perspective. Thus, by saluting *le Sexe de Dada* with such fanfare, the public gathered at the Salle Gaveau did justice to *Princess X*. Associating Brancusi with their creative effort, if only indirectly and in a way that also implied plagiarism – *le Sexe de Dada* was essentially just a more 'popular' replica of *Princess X*. The dadaists were merely obeying their poetics, staying faithful to the principle of 'creative collectivism'.

William Camfield goes through a similar scenario with two versions of *Princess X*, exhibited in America at around the same time: one in bronze, at the Modern Gallery in 1916, and the other in marble at the New York Independents exhibition in 1917, a piece that belonged to the collectors Louise and Walter Arensberg. The American press did not fail, at the time, to underline the sexual connotations: 'We are not of the class that favours drapery for the legs of the piano stool, but phallic symbols under the guise of portraiture should not be permitted in any public exhibition hall'.¹¹ It was on the same occasion that Duchamp exhibited his urinal piece, *Fontaine*. Camfield draws attention to the complementary character of the works by Duchamp and Brancusi – the urinal by the one, chastely titled *Fountain*, and the statue by the other, bearing the title of *Princess X*: 'It is most unlikely that Duchamp missed the female/male fusion of forms in Brancusi's *Princess X*. Indeed – the distinctions between *Fountain* and *Princess X* notwithstanding – the affinities between these works are sufficient to raise the possibility that *Princess X* contributed to the conception of *Fountain*'.¹² Especially since Duchamp seemed to be the most 'qualified' for such an approach, associating one of his own works – in a non-ostentatious way – with another signed by his friend Brancusi, with the two works sharing a similar significance, marked by sexual connotations. The hypothesis seems to be confirmed by a note from Duchamp himself, from around 1913, and later introduced in his *Boîte Blanche*, in which he warns: 'One only has: for female the public urinal, and one lives by it'.¹³ The fact that *Princess X* may have contributed, albeit only in a purely conceptual way – to the genesis of Duchamp's *Fontaine* seems to indicate its powers of inspiration. If Duchamp's urinal may have been inspired by it, it is highly likely that events at the presentation of *Sexe de Dada* at the Salle Gaveau took a similar course. By proceeding in this manner, the dadaists were only consolidating the principle of 'creative collectivism', which was generally approved by the historical avant-garde as a whole. The work of these two artists and friends will again be subject to a genuine authentic symbiosis, notably when, on the express wish of Duchamp (but without Brancusi's permission), the sculpture *Leda* is twice presented in close proximity to his work, *The Large Glass*: during the exhibition of the Société Anonyme, organised at the Brooklyn Museum in New York in November–December 1926, in the home of Katherine Dreier, in West Redding, Connecticut (where Duchamp later goes in the summer of 1936 to restore *The Large Glass* when it is damaged during its presentation at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926), and in the pages of the monograph, *Duchamp*, which was published by Robert Lebel in 1959.¹⁴ The de-luxe copies of this book were given an insert featuring the

black-and-white photo taken in West Redding in 1936, but coloured by hand by Duchamp himself. This repeated 'symbiosis' seems merely to be the expression of Duchamp practising 'creative collectivism', but without the authorisation of his friend, Brancusi. If *Leda* could be seen on each occasion through the transparency of *The Large Glass*, it was not pure chance, but was rather due to the fact that Duchamp wanted to 'remodel' the significance of his masterpiece, having abandoned it in America in 1923 in a state of 'definitive non-completion'. In other words, *Leda* retrospectively became part of the iconography of *The Large Glass*.¹⁵ (fig. 2).

It seems likely that on his return from the show at the Salle Gaveau on 26 May 1920, Brancusi collected together a collection of ideas about Dada in the form of 'notes' written on three pieces of yellowed paper that were all from the same notebook – a detail that seems to be significant. This could be tangible proof that his crop of ideas about Dada all date from one and the same day. It is not impossible to imagine that it was recorded for posterity as soon as the sculptor returned home, having been a guest of the dadaists. These notes retain 'all the freshness' of dada ideas and action:

¹⁵ See Cristian-Robert Velescu, 'La "conjunction" du Grand Verre et de Leda, une forme d'autobiographisme déguisé', *Autour de l'atelier de Constantin Brancusi: Chemins des modernités, chemins des avant-gardes*, translated by Maria Tenebes, Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic Gold, 2015, pp. 288–311.



Fig. 2 [cat. 32]
Hans "John" D. Schiff (1907–1976)
Marcel Duchamp's *Grand Verre* (*Large Glass*) (1915–1923)
with Constantin Brancusi's *Léda* (*Leda*) (ca. 1920)
visible behind it at Katherine S. Dreier's home, *Laurel Manor*,
Milford, Connecticut
Spring or summer 1949 (printed 1956–1957)
Gelatin silver print
35 × 23,5 cm (sheet)
34,4 × 22,9 cm (image)
Collection Paul B. Franklin, Paris

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This fragment written by Brancusi seems to be the 'sketch' of a fragment taken from the *Dada Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love*: 'dada est bon parce qu'il n'est pas mauvais, dada est mauvais, dada est une religion, dada est une poésie, dada est un esprit, dada est sceptique, dada est une magie, je connais dada' [dada is good because it isn't bad, dada is bad, dada is a religion, dada is a poem, dada is a spirit, dada is skeptical, dada is magic, I know dada]. See Tristan Tzara, 'Manifeste sur l'amour faible et l'amour amer', in *Œuvres complètes*, text prepared, presented and annotated by Henri Béhar, Paris, Flammarion, 1975, vol. I, p. 383.

17

For the three sheets of notes concerning Dada, see Doina Lemny, C.-R. Veleescu, *Brâncuși inedit. Însemnări și corespondență românească*, Bucharest, Humanitas, pp. 73–74.

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See the end of the *Manifeste Dada 1918*, entitled 'Dégoût dadaïste [Dadaist Disgust]', as well as 'chapters' XIII and XV of *Manifeste sur l'amour faible et l'amour amer* [The Manifesto on Feeble Love and Bitter Love]. See Tristan Tzara, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Flammarion, 1975, vol. I, p. 367, pp. 385–386.

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During the Dada event at the Grand Palais on 6 February 1920, Aragon, Eluard, Soupault, Ribemont-Dessaignes, Arp, Dermée, Walter Conrad Arensberg, Céline Arnould each proclaimed their own manifesto. In the author's absence, the manifesto by W.C. Arensberg was read by Francis Picabia. See M. Sandoz, 1965, *op. cit.*, pp. 132–133.

20

See Iarbu Brezianu, *Brâncuși în România*, Bucharest, Editura Academiei, 1976, p. 30; and D. Lemny, *Une danseuse roumaine dans l'avant-garde parisienne*, Lyon, Éditions Fage, 2012, p. 32.

'Theories are just worthless samples. Only action counts. Since we invented artists, the arts have been on the run. It is only the idea that is Dada – the rest is slavery – but Dada sculpture is everything that lives without shackles.'

'The dada events are just posters. Dada does not do business. Dada brings you joy. Dada entertains (amuses) you. Dada cleans out your brain. God Dada brings you the key to Paradise.'¹⁶

'Dada is cuddly. Dada is fierce. Dada is good. Dada is mean. Dada is smart. – ' – stupid. – ' – queen. – ' – slave. – ' – cries. – ' – shits. – ' – goes pee-pee. – ' – makes love – ' – loves. – ' – does not love. Dada does everything.'

Taken as a whole, these three pages of 'notes'¹⁷ offer a fairly precise definition of the Dada phenomenon. Now, if we go through the manifestos bequeathed by Tzara, we see that their author, while thoroughly exploring the singularity of Dada, uses the same device of the list.¹⁸ In this case, we may wonder: might Brancusi have been inspired by the manifestos that Tzara may have presented to him in person? Given that the Dada ideologue was a guest at the Impasse Ronsin, that the reading of the manifestos was an obligatory part of the programme at Dada events (expressly imposed by Tzara) and that Brancusi was informed of this 'ritual', it may be argued not only that Brancusi would have been inspired by Tzara's manifestos when writing his notes, but that he might even have written them in the hope of being invited to the next Dada event – not this time as a mere spectator, but as an agent of Dada, ready to proclaim his own manifesto¹⁹ (fig. 3).

Because of this invitation, the studios of the Impasse Ronsin became, over time, a real 'extension' of the Paris Dada scene, as evidenced by various testimonies (from Mihalovici and Tzara, among others), as well as photos – some taken by the sculptor himself (fig. 4). If not, how should we interpret the photos from the time that are preserved in the Brancusi archives? The photo of Lizica Codréano, for example, as a dancer surrounded by the artist's sculptures, interpreting the *Gymnopédies* of Erik Satie in a stage costume improvised around by Brancusi.²⁰ Or that of Man Ray, in the immediate vicinity of *Grand Poisson*, as a percussionist lashing out at an imaginary bass drum, his face lit up in ecstasy (fig. 5, 6, 7, 8, 9)

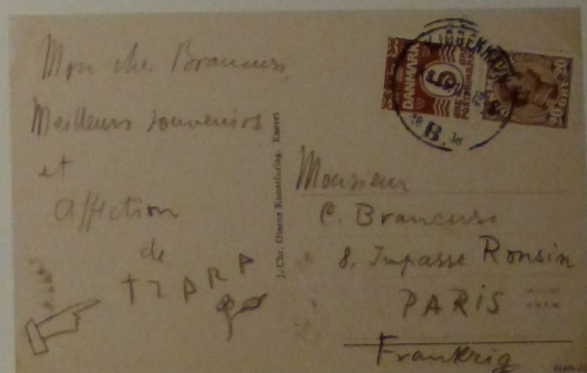
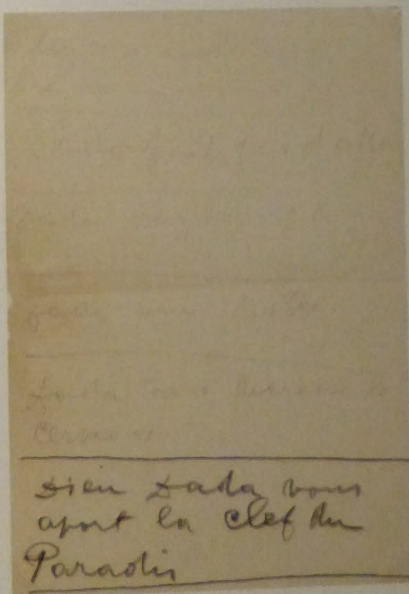
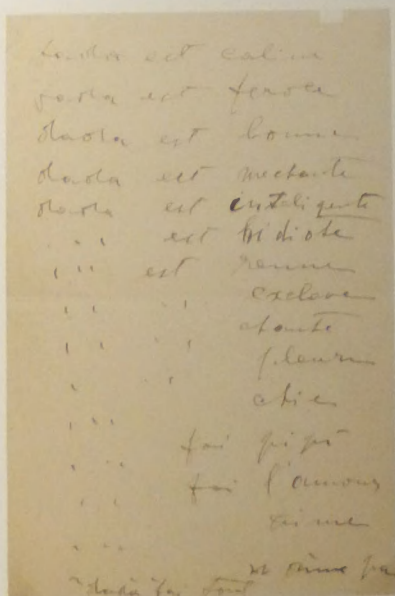


Fig. 4 [cat. 34]
Postcard from Tzara Addressed to Brancusi,
3 August 1925
Pencil on paper
Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou,
MNAM-CCI, Paris

Fig. 3 [cat. 33]
Constantin Brancusi
Two Hand-Written Notes on Dada [1920–1921]
Ink on paper
Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou,
MNAM-CCI, Paris



Fig. 5 [cat. 35]
Constantin Brancusi
*Lizica Codreanu interpreting Erik Satie's
Gymnopédies in Brancusi's studio, circa 1922*
Gelatin-silver print, 23.8 x 178. cm
Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York



Fig. 6 [cat. 36]
Constantin Brancusi
Lizica Codreanu in Brancusi's Studio, circa 1922
Gelatin-silver print on baryta paper, 23.8 × 17.8 cm
Collection NMNM



Fig. 7 [cat. 37]
Constantin Brancusi
Lizica Codreanu in Brancusi's Studio, circa 1922
Gelatin-silver print on baryta paper, 23.8 × 15.2 cm
Collection NMNM



Fig. 8 [cat. 38]
Constantin Brancusi
Lizica Codreanu Dancing in Sonia Delaunay's Studio,
circa 1922
Gelatin-silver print, 18.1 × 13.3 cm
Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York

This same scene at the Impasse Ronsin was generously extended to Romanian avant-gardists, insofar as they felt obliged to visit the master whenever they were staying in Paris, or merely passing through – a trend that he had apparently ended up turning into a ritual. Thus, Tristan Tzara, Marcel Janco, Benjamin Fondane, Ilaria Voronca, Mihail Cosma (alias Claude Sernet), Victor Brauner, Jacques Hérold and others all crossed the threshold of the studio. In this sense, the sculptor's invitation to present works at the exhibition of the avant-garde Bucharest magazine *Contimporanul* (in December 1924) indicates the high level of their admiration as much as their desire to establish the prestige of the exhibition – even if the letter's two signatories, Marcel Janco and Ion Vinea, had little hope of being granted any works by the master. When reading their letter in detail, it is easy to see that the organisers had pretty low expectations in terms of the works they were anticipating: 'Our group is organising its first modern exhibition and for the month of December we would like to ask you to send us some pieces, even if they are just drawings, photos, anything [...]. We cannot imagine an exhibition of cubists, suprematists, and constructivists without you. We look forward to receiving your reply, please accept the expression of our gratitude.'²¹

The fact that the sculptor's work is not related to cubism, suprematism or constructivism may explain Brancusi's lack of response. However, at the insistence of one of his former students, Milița Petrașcu, Brancusi ultimately decided to send twelve photos representing a number of his sculptures and studio views. Once the exhibition had closed, some of these photos were reproduced in the January 1925 issue of *Contimporanul* that was especially dedicated to Brancusi (fig. 10, 11).

²¹ See D. L. ... C. P. Velescu, *op. cit.*, pp. 218–220.



Fig. 9
Constantin Brancusi
Man Ray in the Studio, circa 1930



Fig. 10
Contimporanul, No. 50–51, November–
December 1924,
Bucharest
Private collection



Fig. 11
Contimporanul, No. 52, January 1925,
Bucharest
Private collection

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Letter from Voronca, written in French and sent to Brancusi on 18 July 1929. See D. Lemny, C.-R. Velescu, *op. cit.*, p. 367.

Over the course of the 1920s, Brancusi's studio became a sort of 'crossroads' where innovative ideas intersected, a genuine 'medium' that helped to foster their osmotic transmission. The manner in which Brancusi's art was received by the artists of the Romanian avant-garde seems to illustrate this exchange of ideas. They went to the Impasse Ronsin as frenzied iconoclasts, eventually accepting the 'yoke' of a timeless form of classicism peculiar to the art of Brancusi. The sculptor managed to 'tame' these convinced followers of futurism, dadaism and surrealism. This process is illustrated in a peremptory way by the texts that Tzara, Marcel Janco, Fondane and Voronca dedicated to him (fig. 12, 13). Yet an extract from a letter that Voronca addressed to the sculptor seems to condense the singularity and complexity of this whole modernity/avant-garde dialectic: 'To have approached you and met you gives me a great deal of strength, an example that will give courage and essential meaning to my activity. I would never have believed that such a high level of purity was attainable, and I will never forget the intelligence and richness of your words and stones.'²²

I would like to thank Maria Țenchea for her careful reading of the French version of my text.

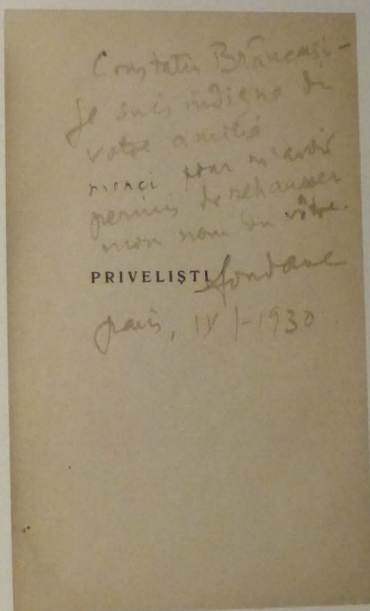
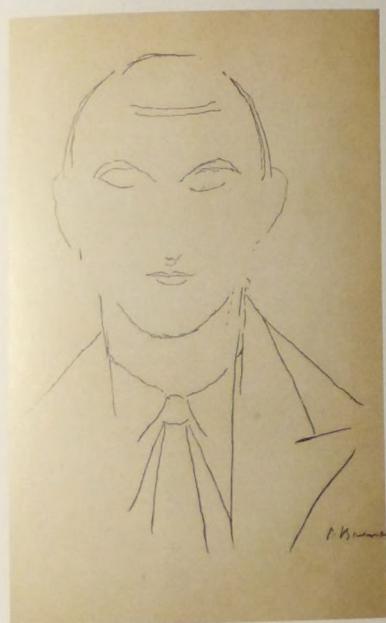


Fig. 12 [cat. 39]

B. Fundoianu, *Privelisti: poeme, 1917-1923*, cu un portret inedit de Brâncuși
Bucharest, Cultura națională, 1930
Bibliothèque Kandinsky,
Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Paris

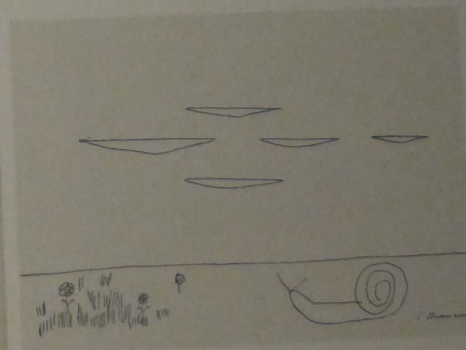
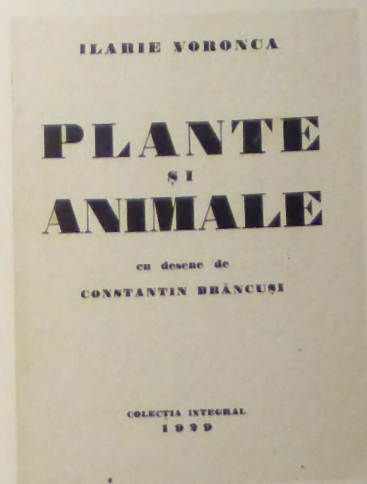


Fig. 13 [cat. 40]
Ilarie Voronca, *Plante și animal; terase*, cu desene de Constantin Brâncuși
Bucharest, Colecția Integral, 1929
Private collection